

# PLANNING SUCCESS OFTEN OVERSHADOWED BY GROWING NEEDS

BY DAVE GOODE

Widen a few lanes. Deny a handful of subdivision proposals. Build a school or two. All seem like easy fixes to Chesterfield County's growing pains. But, it's just not that simple.

Maintaining and improving quality of life in a county nationally recognized for quality is never – and has never been – easy. There are many variables to consider, and many unknowns.

The hot-button issues surrounding growth in Chesterfield have changed over the years. How structures are built and how they appear, though still critical, are today overshadowed by such needs as reducing traffic congestion and overcrowded classrooms.

How the county plans for growth also has changed. During the 1970s and 80s, by far the county's biggest building-boom decades, county planners had limited tools at their disposal. Today, they have many detail-oriented plans, prepared with the public's help, that are steering new development. There are plans steering development adjacent to existing development instead of sprawling into the countryside, standards for buffers and tree preservation, and requirements for public water and sewer hookups. There's a program outlining capital improvements for the county and a system to collect cash proffers from developers to aid in paying for those improvements. Areas where growth should be deferred and prevented have been identified. There are water quality standards and plans to revitalize village areas developed years ago.

Perceptions vary widely when it comes to growth. The strain that growth puts on public services and facilities constantly is being compared to the value that growth adds to the local economy. And driving it all is a society that demands growth. Seldom are new homes built in Chesterfield that aren't sold or occupied immediately, and businesses answer those new residents' needs for everything from groceries and gas to clothing and entertainment.

## STRIKING A BALANCE

Because growth is market-driven, it's unrealistic to talk about halting growth, said Pete Stith, deputy county administrator for Community Development. "You must, instead, talk about managing the growth that is occurring."

Virginia very much supports the rights of property owners. Local government can't stop

development just because it will strain public services and facilities. Doing so would be illegal because the state hasn't given its localities that authority. Other states, such as Florida and Maryland, have allowed their localities to adopt ordinances requiring that growth be slowed until schools and roads are built, essentially telling landowners that until public services and facilities are in place they will have to defer their development plans or pay impact fees to meet public needs. This approach, consequently, is not available to Chesterfield County planners.

So often, things such as new roads and schools are expected to be in place and ready to serve at a pace in keeping with the growing population. More often than not in Virginia, though, road improvements and new schools follow the residential development for which they are needed.

County planners continually work to narrow that gap.



PHOTO BY DAVE GOODE

Requiring public water and sewer service in new subdivisions helps steer growth to fringe areas that are adjacent to existing development.

## BRINGING ORDER

"Growth is a bumpy road and we do have growing pains," said Tom Jacobson, director of the Chesterfield County Planning Department.

The pattern of development has become more orderly thanks to the many planning tools in use.

One such tool is the county's requirement that new subdivisions be served by the public water and sewer system, which has meant less scattered development because it encourages new growth to occur on the fringes of areas already developed. New subdivisions continue to be built, but it's more likely today that they'll be built adjacent to other development because the cost of tying into the public water and sewer system from outlying areas is cost prohibitive for developers.

Scattered development, commonly called "urban sprawl," began occurring after World War II, creating challenges to provide public water and sewer, roads and many other public services as well, such as police, fire and rescue.

County planners have worked with concerned citizens and businesses to study such challenges, and in many cases, solutions have been identified. But good planning doesn't guarantee that problems will be solved immediately.

"The results will come over time," Jacobson said.

## EASING THE FLOW

Demonstrating the time commitment involved in good planning is perhaps no more apparent than when it comes to roads, which because of state funding shortfalls in recent years haven't been improved at a rate that county residents would prefer and for which the county has planned. The reason: Chesterfield County is like most other Virginia counties in that the road system is maintained by the state, not the county. Henrico and Arlington counties are the only two Virginia counties that maintain their own road systems.

"For people who relocate here from other parts of the country, this really is a unique situation for them," said John McCracken, director of the county's Transportation Department. "A lot of localities in the north, for example, maintain their own roads."

The fact that there is a county Transportation Department can be confusing since the county doesn't build or maintain roads. Without it, though, the county would only be further stressed in that it competes for road funding with 14 other jurisdictions in the state's Richmond Construction District. The county department was formed in 1984 to make sure it was getting its fair share and to work with the state in an effort to accelerate local road improvements and to keep them within budget.

The department also plans for future transportation needs by maintaining and revising annually a six-year road plan that identifies where improvements are needed and sets a tentative schedule for when those improvements could be expected, pending the availability of state dollars. The state has a similar six-year plan that is coordinated with localities, however, challenges in state funding in recent years continue to hold up projects.

An example of this would be the planned improvements to Route 360, or Hull Street Road, a major artery that causes frowns for many motorists who tackle its bumper-to-bumper traffic. Chesterfield County had made planned improvements to the highway a priority in the late 1980s and extended a contract in the late 90s to begin designing the improvements. Available state funding would dip, however, and those improvements had to be put on hold.

"We've been prepared to make the improvements to 360 for some time," McCracken said. "The state funding shortfalls are really what have pushed the improvements back. We continue to work with the state to see if we can find a way to accelerate that construction."

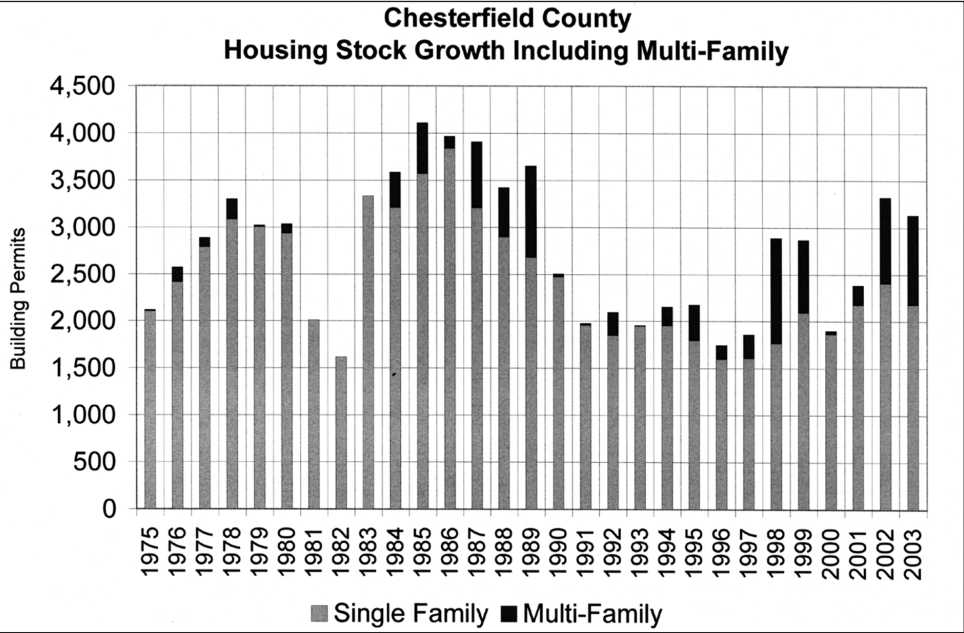
The county understands the frustration of motorists and has even offered to loan money to the state to get the improvements started.

On a positive note, the much-anticipated northward extension of Route 288 is expected to be open this summer, accomplishing a needed improvement in north-south traffic flow in the county.

While the state has the final say about where and when improvements to primary highways occur, the county determines where available state dollars will be spent to improve secondary roads. Just like Route 360 though, state funding shortfalls have negatively impacted improvements to both primary and secondary roads.

## PICKING UP THE TAB

Chesterfield has developed a philosophy that growth should pay for itself in terms of its



COURTESY OF PLANNING DEPARTMENT

impact on public services, despite the fact that the county can't legally mandate that developers pay impact fees. To support that philosophy, the county did adopt a cash-proffer system in 1989, the first year that the state government made it available. Cash proffers are funds offered by developers when they request that properties be rezoned for development. These proffers help defray the county's cost of providing capital improvements to support growth. Today developers may proffer up to \$9,000 per residential lot.

Cash proffers have helped considerably, however, their benefits won't be realized fully for years to come.

"It's a good tool, long-term, for the county," Jacobson said. "What's happening now though is that much of our development does not pay cash proffers because it's occurring on properties zoned for development before cash proffers existed."

Also, the early proffer amount was much less, so there remain many residential lots paying less than the needed amount.

County government and school officials currently are working together to update the

county's Public Facilities Plan, which will eye needed public facilities, including schools, to meet demand for the next 20 years, Jacobson said.

"The cash proffer is part of the income to the county to pay for some of these improvements," he said. "That work is being done."

## EYEING THE FUTURE

With the exception of state-funding woes having put the brakes on road improvements, county planners, working with citizens, have identified both where to steer the county's growth, as well as how to pay for its impact.

"We have the financial capacity to keep up with everything but roads," Jacobson said.

Through the continued use of planning tools, such as use of planned growth areas or boundaries, the cost of keeping pace with public services can be reduced and where development occurs will become more predictable.

"If we stick to good, orderly development that is economically feasible, we will be reducing the need for roads and other public facilities and services to support the growing population," Jacobson said. "That's what good planning does."